

JUVENAL SOTO

***Heavens of
September***

(Translation from Spanish by Daniel Murphy)

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Identifier: 2108309113365

Date of registration: Aug-30-2021 17:13 UTC

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Certificate Cedro

Registration number: k3YgEDwk-2021-08-31T17:18:08.103

Fingerprint of the archive:

B0-69-EA-E8-3B-44-D7-CA-80-91-69-CE-49-C1-4D-FE-02-A1-7E-26-7F-72-8E-
00-66-B9-2F-48-B4-9C-3A-E6-80-42-D8-53-A3-CA-C9-A0-6B-D8-2A-B6-0A-77-
CD-50-82-0D-C5-EC-36-57-D6-1E-60-9A-18-9A-73-68-53-47

“Stories—he answered—have no ending, my friend.
The ones that I’ve lived will end when I end and, who knows,
perhaps they will continue in other beings.”

Alvaro Mutis. *Un bel morir*

***The Emperor and the Army
Are Well*** ⁽¹⁾

The dust on the books, words,
Dusk dimming, fleeting book shelves,
The rising moon, the remains
Of that fire, the voice with which you craft

The gem stones of the sonnet. Do not cleave them
As if they were the glittering of a diamond.
Keep the eternity of that moment
Like an Olympian god among his flock.

Should they ask you what became of the troops,
Do not answer that time turned them into straw,
That the hours of gold are darkening;

Tell them that the dead are happily sailing
Away over your cup of wine, on a boat
Heedless of Death.

Days on the Shore

To Enrique Martínez Vidal

Dragged up by the fury of storms,
Monstrous cadavers of cattle
Were still wide-eyed
As if begging heaven for a clemency
Which they were not again to see.

We set about prodding with our lances
—spikes of sugar cane—the drums of their bellies.
From the depths of the dead animals
Issued a great gust of happiness,
For we imagined that those corpses had come to realize,
At some moment during the deluge,
Amid the muddy and terrifying waters,
That there and only there was to be found freedom,
A roar of waste and silt-laden branches,
An avalanche of strange beasts
Which were never to tread
The tall grass of the pastures
Nor the dairyman's hut.

For us, too, the great rush of mud
Was a way to be free,
A means to go down to the sea
To reclaim what did not belong to it,
A sort of wild restitution:
Back to land what belongs to land.

Upon returning, and packed into the skiff,
One of us proposed a feast,
Another, knife for blinding cats in hand,
Sliced the bread of the world,
Handing it out among the deep-sea divers of souls.

After rounding the Punta of Las Acacias,
The skin of the night would be ours
And ours, too, the lights shimmering over the waves,
Lights illuminating the feet of the giant stone god
As he, hands crossed on his heart, presided over the seas.

He who believes in you—so I used to utter—
May his death be not eternal.

On the horizon the drifting bodies of the drowned
Were neither at peace with the waters
Nor did they ascend from the depths.

Where Not a Tomb Exists

Awestruck, we would gaze at the inhabitants
Of those steep ravines when the clouds
Were a crimson river flowing into the night.
A river—so we believed—where the moon would sketch
Strange signs, where someone
Endeavored to read our destiny.
But destiny, back then, was all the same to us immortals.
The grave cast no shadowy letter
Over us and our words.

Hunting birds to possess the prey.
That was our destiny and our sole labor,
Just as the swimmer at sea decides
That no port will be the terminus of his hapless journey
Because on the water he found a certainty,
The true rhythm of the heart that cries out
And floats and strives and is a fish,
And knows that Death, drooling,
Waits on the docks.

A few of us, and not the weakest,
Fashioned from that afternoon a dwelling.
And in that place survive
The reed that leashes the dog,
The blade that polishes the abdomen of queens,
The path of the ever returning ants,
And those hard-shelled walnuts; these very ones
Whose center—though no one definitively knows—
May by now be rotten.

Dickinson College

For Carol and Arturo Fox

On the lawn of this campus
I was young and had friends
And a house nearby,
And the meadow of a body
I named Niagara.
Each night, over her waters
My destiny sketched a river
And raised a mountain.
If one flowed toward infernos,
The other mounted up above the heavens,
And, at dawn, the Earth flowed slowly
Down like a launch.

Next to my house, Niagara
Planted an immense forest.
There, in the evening,
She would hang out her books,
Which the wind would blow
As though they were trees.
In the fall, we said,
Perhaps Verlaine would rain,
But it was Whitman
Who in summer opened
The bitter orange
To be withered by the heat.

As in the Kipling story,
I possessed an island
In the eyes of a dead man.
If I closed his eyes,
He would sink like a stone
Into the sea of oblivion,
But, if opened,
Therein flourished
Fearful gardens.
We wondered if they were not
The thickets of Paradise.

At times, streaming down from the Appalachians, (2)

Came siren songs of the air.
We would then drink
The wine of the unhappy
While those sirens
Looked for a place
To contemplate
The color of that land of jade.
Close by lies the heart
Of those who in Gettysburg
Found the freedom
To be no longer anywhere,
Not even in the memory
Of the clouds nor of the dogs
Whose furious barking followed them.

On this grass,
On this morning of snow and hawks,
Someone remembered another
Who once young
And had friends.
Indifferently, the first one
Remembers a confused scribble of a text
Filled with figures and facts.
The memory of both of them
Is the same,
And identical, too, the name
That the one and the other bear.
The two are unaware
That they are in no way distinct.

Of the first we know
That he was here
Thanks to what the other wrote.
Of the latter we know nothing.
Nonetheless, a third
Will again write:
“On the lawn of this campus
I was young and had friends...”
We will then know, thanks to these verses,
That they are three times
Of a single life sentence.

The Trojan Archer

If I bit the tendon
That connected your heel to my life
It wasn't to hurt you,
Nor to hear you scream.
It was to tear away all you had of me,
It was so that you would know
That I will continue to live
Together with the rest of the beasts,
And that it is I who thus endeavors
To drag your body into my dwelling.

Wedding March

For the Entertainment of a Certain Lady

The pearl of your young hips,
Your succulent fruits in flower,
Heart and beauty blessing
The blasts and banners of winter.

One is ice, the others, *guayaberas*
Of the jewel you so poorly sold.
What you see is not the devil, not the gods.
It is the light of a flameless fire.

To the aged man you give the set
Of your tender thighs, the magical summers
Of you fingers, your mouth, the vial

That emanates height for dwarves.
The snowy gusts lead you by the hand.
Enter into the night that beckons you.

Church of Hollins University (3)

To Daniel Murphy

Over these stones decked in wood and glass,
Someone built a church for all creeds,
A place for those who wish to talk to their gods
About transcendent matters such as roast beef,
Girl friends, or about that body whose empty space in bed
Will for evermore fill the trace
Left by so many others
Sheltered there by love and storms.

Lord—said the Catholic girl from Virginia—
How weary I am from keeping my honey,
For no lover of sweets will come close,
Knowing that my stash is yours alone.
Lord, I no longer want to belong to you
Because I love a man and he knows better than you
What is to be done with my sweets.

Oh, dear God, why did I, a black girl from Georgia,
Come to this university where all the girls are white?
You know, oh Lord, how I yearn for the down
That covers the milk-white thighs of those virgins of sugar.

Oh Heavenly Father—prayed the professor of German—
You who sets the course of rivers and brings the snows,
Father, give me the strength of Siegfried,
And an idea as beautiful as Hegel's clouds.
Father, grant me your servant this petition,
And then, if it is your will, choke me to death.

Over these wood and glass-decked stones
Flows a music that someone composed
For all men and all of their gods.
It is a swaying music under whose spell
The university's green grass
Assumes a gesture and a desire.

The gesture and desire of this angel from Tennessee who,
Blond as the dream of a summer by the lake,
Plays the keyboard and watches the dance
Of the ballerinas and the paralyzed gods.
Oh, yes, seal the doors
Lest I hear the funeral dirge
Of the dark god of the Israelites!

Marble Torso of a Roman Youth
(Second Century A. D.)

To Pablo García Baena

His flesh, pale as the marble
Fashioned into the destiny of his days,
Is on display in the show window
Of a nearby antiques store on
The Alameda de Hércules.
As for his soul, if he had one,
No one is sure what merchant
Might now possess it.
Two centuries after Christ,
Someone did make sure that a block
Of purest stone render him immortal,
Like the flight of birds
Or the ebb and flow of the tides.

I invited him to dine with me,
To share lamb,
And his story and the stories
Of those who were his companions.
He was reticent and noticeably uncomfortable
But the wine brought to his memory
The fire of other nights,
And he inquired as to the names
Of my wife and children and of other kin.
In a voice that sounded most like
The pastor's song to his flock,
He spoke of the fire that leveled someone's heart,
Someone very dear to him
In the port of Hadrian's city.

I realized that the place was not accurate, but that his story was
When, as we stood before the sprawling river,
He spoke to me of its waters
As the greatest ever seen by a Roman.

I knew then that the birthmark
Gracing his breast
Was but a trace left by the years spent under the silt.
I feared for my life,

So distant until that night;
For just as one river covered his heart,
So another likely covers
Marble stone in the city of the dead.

I then placed two coins
On that ruin
And walked into the night,
Again alone, knowing now with certainty
About myself and about many others,
We who are not even torsos of the ancient past.

Elbo (4)

To the Twilight of One Who Was Nothing

The horns of the moon deck you not.
You are rained in a gaping mouth, in the deceit
Of a flesh so old that it is stretched out
Like a viper dragging itself across the dunes.

Nor are you adorned in ideas,
Nor in beauty, nor in grace; what stands is
An empty strip of jerky still breathing
Among olés and tired couplets. You starve

To swallow the brilliant verse
Of others, whose fame you take as your own,
Thief and lord of the self-serving.

May the Fates, with tedious fury,
Show what is absolutely true about you:
You were, are, and will be *Elbo*, *El Boludo*.

Baghdad (5)

This city was not a matter for men,
But its river was, as were those who therein dwelt
Much to the surprise of its waters.
If cobalt were the purest of colors,
The Tigris would be not the river of purity,
But the form of purity racing to the sea,
There where it dissolves among
Shipwrecks and algae,
And the great bull whales
That swim southward should the world of man
End there,
There where dawn, no longer part of the night,
Is born.
The emperor thus knows
That in his birth there was a river,
A dream of sweet waters
From which issues, since his youth,
Deep and bitter, the form of his life.
And another form, the way of
Being here: barely a memory,
And fire and water.

This city was not a matter for men,
But its river was.
Those who therein dwelt know
That neither cities nor men
Are matters of much import to rivers.

Gods From Far Below (6)

Evening's banquet on the boulevard
And the water of rivers, both flow
Like the cloud and the birds that sense
The evening on another river, on another boulevard.

Summer and death, a sidewalk,
A dream, along your body shadows
Of what you were disappear. Those who flee
Likely know that not even as much as the shadow remains.

Neither the river, nor the nascent green, nor dusk,
Nor the emptiness that dogs your steps,
Only were you are is what you hold.

The rain on the crystal of those glasses
Is not true; a sham, too, were your gods
From whose clay you hail.

I Don't Know What to Title This

What else could you possibly offer me
But your very flesh?
Or do you wish I would dwell in the ruins of your soul,
To take refuge there, like a Barbarian
From the siege of Rome's legions?

Fifty years, a feast of shattered bulbs
Among festoons of crimson crepe paper
Faded by time
Like debris strewn about the shore.

What else could you give to the one who had been your master
but your very flesh?
This, no matter how much you always
Denied me not the greetings
Of those who open their lives to summer,
But the farewell of hostile winter.

May God take his holiday,
May Lucifer to this tenement come
With his nights and pearls,
With the laughter of his cats, and the fire
That in your heart I would rob
Like a jewel stolen
In the tavern of those who love.

What else but your very flesh
Could halt the music and disperse the carnival
Where not even oblivion dances?

Fifty years, and the moon,
Immense as the chill of the drowned.

The Medal (7)

(A Gift from Elsa, circa 1977)

You arrived like an odd insect
That, upon extending its wings,
Belongs to all yet to no one in particular.

The grapevine beetle knows
That its time was summer and locusts,
And that before that sweltering heat and that music
Life is a bale of hay, darkness, and a thin membrane.
It recognizes a purple shell wherein
The female, quietly lurking,
Yearns to be fire and fruit.

That summer of nineteen hundred and something,
I withstood the calumny of my life
Like an emblem of molten silver,
Without shade, but rich in fruit so sweet
That milk and honey were nothing.
Milk, honey, streams
Where insects shine
And death shimmers when you call my name.

From my neck, Elsa, you dangle snow.
It goes burning with me, as we so wished.

The Horizon and Nelson (8)

*To my father, with whom I sailed this
and other stories*

The seas that in the vacuum await me,
And the waves, the flame of the light houses,
Trafalgar—the victory I managed to give you—
And the crimson of evening over the harbor.

The cables, chilling gusts and bays,
The billowing smoke of love from loving all of you so,
The night, the stars, and the rare
Dreams on those enchanted isles.

Your breast, my wild fires, bunks,
The liquors, your kisses, mahogany,
The rivers we crossed without Charon.

Tides, some port or another, the *lobas*
Del mar and their tridents. Broom bushes
And the wind. These will erase the horizon.

Homer's Woods (9)

For Antonio Soler

Seated on the terrace of that café
A woman weeps.
On the table she has left
Several pieces of paper, perhaps a letter
From someone recounting
How the Trojans succumbed
Under the hands of others offended
By he who robbed the soul of that woman
Whose body he loved
Above all else.

On this snowy morning, the birds
Bring news of those
Who order clothes and affection
From cities strange to us
And to the tongue in which we utter
The names of everything we know.
Perhaps because of the flight
Of those birds and these verses
We might know of the shores sought
But never trod
By those who set sail.

They wander through uncharted regions of the Earth,
Knowing not how they became lost,
Even though they can guess the cause
That mustered up their courage,
Joining it with that of he who said:
Come with me, for I have been robbed
Of part of what I once was.

A woman weeps and sips her coffee
Delivered with a bit of bread
And a receipt on which the price of
Her stay here is scribbled,
On this morning where on pieces of paper
—perhaps a letter—
Someone tells of how his affection or maybe his love
Allied him with that of others

To seek what was lost by one
Who, in the end, gained oblivion.

Like all those others
Who possess the tears of this woman
Seated on the terrace of a café,
Where all of us, at one time,
Have been mourned as dead.

Avenue in October (10)

For Jorge Shaw Iribarne

The deities of dream
Take their afternoon stroll down this street
Leading to the sea.
This avenue is neither
Broad nor beautiful,
But the African-born wind rises
And leaves something here
Akin to the warm
And domestic happiness
Of those who don't ask why.

The clouds sketch
The outline of the travelers
Who discover the waves and pray
For their dead children,
Or for the ones that never arrived,
Like this treeless street
In whose shade the dog
May recognize its master
And know how music
Is not solely from the world
That sleeps and dreams,
Nor from those gods
Who stroll through the evening
And walk down to the sea
Should there be something adrift
Even close to
This happiness.

The Shadow (11)

You will find in the prose of Casares
The world that you level with your hands:
Buenos Aires, verses and seas,
The wine of bacchanals, the dwarves,

Las Meninas, Velázquez, the Marranos
Of Toledo and Seville. His exquisitely set table
Will not be the shadow of your household gods,
Nor will his nights, nor his summers.

The world of the sonnet that you level,
The world of hendecasyllables and the still
Flow of the planets and tides

Of Bioy, Jorge Luis Borges, is yet another challenge:
That incomplete world of worlds,
The shadow which, unseen by you, you will be.

Philosophy and Poetry
—*María Zambrano*— (12)

The myth and reason for your failures,
Your nothings, my dear Europa, the tavern
Of shadows, the god of the cavern,
And the names that refuse you

The wine of the sages, the steps of Pythagoras
—numbers—the eternal odyssey
Of Ulysses and the tender
Shelter of isles without sunset,

The sea of passions that startles you,
The shores of oblivion littered
With dreams, and men, and clouds,

The gods and rivers that give them name,
Logic, the vales that carpet it,
The fire to which you descend and to which you rise.

Holy Family (13)

*Because cause and pretext are of all things primary,
And the beginning, on the other hand,
The last of the aforementioned parts*

Polybius, *Histories*, Book Three.

I

(Cain's Smile)

In the name of the son,
I ask my father about my brother.
My father is aged,
He knows that question
Is the reply of the dead,
But I recall an apple orchard on a hill
And the wind that shook those branches
Like a hypnotized devil.

In the name of the son,
I go up in the afternoon to the house of my father
And, in the forest of his inheritance,
Review my obligations as Cain
And ask about my brother,
And my father says that this year's rains
Will bring us the good fortune of gold,
Abundant water in the marshes
Where we shall spend August midst
Heavy air and perhaps decks of poker cards.
For him, our history is
A seaside resort of suffering
With my young mother
And dark within his memory.

In the name of the son,
I place stakes in the earth:
I thus nail down any trace
That may remain of my brother.

II

(The Immortals)

The letters you write to me
Are the tricks of death.
I answer them in a few lines
Directed to the fish
That the women at the market discard.
A few still have bubbles of air
In their gills.
Others, bludgeoned with a hammer,
Died on dry land.
In all of them there is a misspelled word
Which is kept on hand to nail the finest fishbone into your throat.

I had a mother.
At her house we used to eat fish,
Not the kind that spews silt
And the amulets of the shipwrecked.
But the sort that flies from the sea to kisses.
Mom used to say:
You'll choke to death on those bones!
While looking at the tails of cats
I realized that they were the fish
Of my immortal dogs.

The world, from then on,
Has been a bacchanal among savages.

III

(The Garden of Evils)

When the rain lets up
Your brothers will return home.
They are familiar with the virtue
Of migratory women
And at supper they will regale us with feats
Of crocodiles and paper.

Staring me in the eye, they break the bread
And I know that at this table
I'm sharing my life with strangers.

They say they've come from beyond the bonfires,
That they were young and, being in a hurry,
Lost my name among pieces of paper.

I know not these ones
Who call me Father.
I don't even know the shoulders of their mothers,
But they recall happy rooms
In which someone
Talks about God with devils.

This forgotten flesh
Is a ghost come to rob me.
They ask for music and refreshments,
I admire their camouflaged likeness to me.
You may well know—one of them announces—
That we are the offspring of the rain...
I don't know—I answer—it's sunny.
I was going to take my clothes off...
In their faces my own eyes sparkle at me
And, having fallen from the infernos,
These my children are now your siblings.

Do not allow the rain to sponge
Their clever plan to murder me.

***To Gabo, for His Melancholy
Prostitutes***

*“...and in my dream I mixed the cello’s plaint with that of a
sad ship that set sail.”*

Gabriel García Márquez,
The Story of My Melancholy Prostitutes.

Among the winged cherubim
Only music echoes, and the dream of the saddest,
Like a ship over meadows,
Dresses everything in its azure wakes.

May the beloved violins of the bodies
You loved also thus resound.
Like enamored and never-lost heavens
They will lovingly return to your doorstep.

Nevertheless, you remember not
The fifes and drums of love,
Nor the cello strings, nor the fire and flame.

Think of the world and the slow
Songs of the seafarer. Do you recall them?
Music and dreams are but complaints.

The Last End

At times I have imagined my body's end,
And also, to please my friends,
An end for what they refer to
With a woman's name
And which, according to them, is as much a part of me
As my eyes and hands.
No one has ever seen her, but they insist
This is something I do not understand:
She is all that will remain of what I am.

They predict that when all I now have is gone,
That thing, or female, or entity, or music,
Will rise starward,
There to stay above all that the world was.
I really don't know. I see the stars and not a one
Tells me anything, and neither can I tell them apart
By their names, no matter how much Neruda and others,
For instance, mention them as lovers who cheered
Their melancholy nights.
Could it be that my fortune descends
At length like Chile towards the ice?

On other occasions I have imagined the end
(With hardly enough time to mutter
A sentence, I order a shot of Jack Daniel's:
Someone tries to get me to appeal, at last,
To the effigies that my parents adored;
Another tells me that that man is waiting for me
So that I can confess stories
In which I was neither victor nor victim;
What stories could the condemned man tell
When the only story is oblivion?
And then, ablaze under the heat of Africa,
All the memories I had go up in flames,
So that, like lava flowing
Towards the oceans's abyss,
What I have learned of others
Turns to stone:
My life, with yours,
Is an empty foot note
At the bottom of a blank page)

And I've realized that the end
Is not the beginning of something
But another step in what has not been.
Living life, after all, forms part of death. (14)

Buenos Aires You Must Be

*In Memoriam, Vicente Guerrero, who told me of his city.
And to Salvador Moreno Peralta, who writes of it now.*

The city was a dream, an adventure,
Rain on the streets like rivers,
A god running your days and mine,
Lending silver with the water of love.

And more rain, the madness
Of the tango and La Boca, evening's
Pitiless knives and sandbars,
Nightfall, the milonga, the slender waist.

And Buenos Aires was also
The gold of Cortázar, and a body, and a chorus
Of verses and firey steeds, flashes of

*Podés and querés and a voz adoro
And Volá de mi vereda a mi tesoro.
Buenos Aires you must be, because you are all this.*

***The Gentleman on the
Sidewalk at La Opera***

This man who strolls across from the world
Of Petrarch, Verlaine, and Luis Cernuda,
Is Lezama, will be Auster, and was Neruda
If I confound opera and evening

And am spellbound in Segismundo
And in his shadow, a fiction that a serpent,
Slithering through doubt, ties round a dream of
another man who strolls through another world.

The one and the other were melded on a sidewalk
As beautiful as a god, and on a boulevard
As dreamy as a devil in summer.

We know not who borrowed what from whom,
Nor who is the fiction on what sidewalk.
We do know that the two were my brother.

***To Leonardo's Young Lady
and to her Ermine*** (16)

Freed from old winter
And captive of summertime and of an ermine,
Ever-present eternity is
A god dying among the grapevines
Who weaves about your neck
A string of black pearls.

On the back of the beast your fairest finger
Traces a necklace,
And should you look at something or someone,
That something or someone will be sought out by the beast,
From whose gaze issues a gaping mouth
Like talons defending your life
From the world.

May there be no greater eternity than to behold you,
Nor greater dream than the ermine,
If, by keeping the company of your harmonious beauty,
A refuge be found from strife and from the inferno.

The harsh sea of chance
Summons you with vile waves,
And, like Venus, like a beast, rises up
The prodigy of your flesh,
Almost marine and almost snow.

An abyss is the afterwards that saves you
And the here and now are valleys
Where you, a doe and young, pasture
Free of the evil hours that devour us.

May this beauty have no date,
Nor fade through the years.
The beast that safeguards it
Holds, in a verse of Petrarch,
The prison of an eternal isle,
The bitter lemons of April.
And there, turning them about, devours the evil they contain
And saves you thus from the clay.

Freed from ancient winter,
You adorn thieving summer
With music and pools of water
Where a fish sings
And the bird swims,
And where swims and sings, too,
The desire for your duskless body.

A Dream in Reading (17)

To Chelsie and Maximiliano Zúñiga

A man in a garden has this dream:
His life is a lake. Birds wing
On their way to winter, ships go by
As do the dogs of the air behind their master,

And snow and trees and the burnt
Trunk of the hours, and the gentle
Gazelles of the evening. Birds fly over,
Bound for another lake and another dream.

There is a man in a garden beneath a cloud:
His life is a bird. If it rises
It descends into the depths of the heavens,

And on the shores of the lake, if it rises not,
His life is the wind without the cloud.
His life, like a ship among floes of ice.

Notes

1. This formula, cited by M. Yourcenar in *The Memories of Hadrian*, headed the Emperor's official communiqués to the Roman Senate.
2. I was surprised that a siren was a symbol crowning the main campus building of this college in Carlisle, nearly in the center of the state of Pennsylvania.
3. I became acquainted with the chapel of Hollins University (Virginia, USA) during my stay on that campus in November, 2002. The diaphanous and comfortable chapel was conceived as a place for the practice of all religions. Nevertheless, I found copies of the Bible on the back of the pews, discretely placed for the use of Christians. By the way, the undergraduate program of Hollins University is exclusively for women.
4. In Argentine Spanish, *Elbo* is an abbreviation of *el boludo* and is applied as a proper name to persons who are especially idiotic and bothersome. At one time or another, we have all suffered the tyranny of some boludo set on making our life impossible. This poem refers to such an individual whose insufferable ego I had to bear for years. I was suddenly freed from his stubborn stupidity, and as if through the grace of a revelation, at a certain dinner while in the United States.
5. I visited Baghdad in 1988. I think I discovered the beauty of that place—for the most part a memory from legend—in the Tigris. Following the banks of that river down to the sea, I was able to see whales swimming south in the Persian Gulf, perhaps fleeing from what now I can intuit.

The whalers call the old solitary bull whales “Emperors.” This species, to my understanding, are among the animals that can share with men the paradise that Islam offers to its believers.
6. Paul Auster, in *The Book of Illusions*, cites the *Memoirs of the Beyond* of Chateaubriand. I do not recall exactly to what the purpose the passage was cited, but Auster writes: “He learned to assume a distance from himself, to consider himself, in first place, as one among many, then as a passing conglomerate of particles and, finally, as a simple mote of dust; and the further he was away from his point of departure, closer he was to greatness.” Both this paragraph, as well as the fearful abyss on whose edge Auster places his characters, inspired me to write this sonnet.
7. Elsa also appears in another poem, written in 1977 or 1978. She was —and I imagine she continues to be— a very attractive and singular woman. Shortly before we went our own ways, and after a tumultuous summer together, she offered me her Auguru —the symbol of Euskadi, the Basque Country— which hung around her beautiful neck. I accepted the gift and have ever since worn it around my own, less beautiful and not as convinced as to what this talisman means.
8. We know that Lord Nelson accomplished his victory at Trafalgar before dying. As he was dying, and surrounded by his officers on the bridge of his ship, the Admiral of the British fleet begged a young tenant to kiss him. Perhaps in those lips Lord Nelson sought those of Lady Hamilton. Or perhaps not.
9. Before this poem, I wrote a piece in prose that I titled, *The Reader of Homer*. I intended this piece to be a letter from someone to another, but it is not clear who is who. As far as I know, nobody has clarified —neither in the narrative nor in any other genre— what literature may

possibly be, who are its protagonists, nor what may be the spatial and temporal perimeters in which it develops. We only make uncertain conjectures about such subjects. Below, you may find *The Reader of Homer*. It is but another conjecture, mine.

The Reader of Homer

“Every day is the same”

On Nature, Heraclitus

Antonio, My Dear Friend:

I imagined that the reader of Homer receives in the mail a book —the date I don’t know. I suspect that time is a flat dimension in which dates don’t exist, in which all events happen at once—. The reader of Homer is sure that all writers —the sum total of all write—are but one, and that Homer is the sole writer. He’s read *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. *The Iliad*, according to him, is a preparatory text; *The Odyssey*, so the reader sustains, is not a text, it is The Text, and has reached the conclusion that literature is the story of a return. A few men conquer a city so that, after the conquest, they may search for a place to return. Others only return, knowing that their venture is but a return to the place from which they departed and to which they are condemned to return over and over, that one’s destiny is not a place but a way of searching for it, that the venture in search of their destiny is truly their only destiny.

The reader of Homer opens the book he found in the mail. At first sight, he discovers that it is a work of prose. He reads on the book jacket the word *novels*, written thus, in plural. He discovers yet more: the book has been dedicated to him, Reader of Homer, by the very same Homer who, in this book, goes by another name. By Antonio. In a highlighter’s blue ink, the dedication unfolds in nine separate lines before his eyes: “For/ [...] your/ melancholy and the/ weapons with which to vanquish it,/ springtime and this/ downpour of words./ With the friendship/ of/ Antonio.” The ellipsis in the dedication here reproduced is not in the original; instead of the ellipsis, a name is therein written, that of the reader of Homer. But given that this man knows that all writers are but one and the same, doesn’t it follow that all readers are also but one, the reader of Homer who, in turn, is also named Homer? The reader of the blind poet has no doubt as to the answer to this question: Homer is the man who writes for Homer. The reader of Homer is Homer.

Except for Butler, who perpetuated a bit of mischief, that is, he claimed the blind poet of Greece was a woman who saw the faces of those who told the story of Troy that she would write, all of us, or nearly all of us, have at some juncture believed that we’ve discovered the impossibility of but one Homer and the plausibility of a multiple Homer. As far as I know, until now no one has entertained the possibility of a sole and diverse reader, the contingency of a sole reader who, without his knowledge nor that of the rest of the readers who make up his diverse nature, is a multitude of men dedicated to the same task: reading the one writer who, in turn, is a multitude of writers. The most frightening thing is yet to come: that sole and multiple reader is also the sole and multiple writer. This disturbs me and, at the same time, I am comforted by the idea that someone, who is many, is writing for someone who is a multitude. Nonetheless, I am terrified at the conjecture that the latter and the former are one and the same, that someone writes time and again the same story, only to read it time and again.

This stratagem, dear friend, is possible because I accept as fact, or as quite probable, that time may be a dimension lacking in depth, in which all events come about

simultaneously. Cantor's theory of conjuncts allows me to venture that this must be so. Or time may be a trap that allows the holocaust of all creation, including literary creation from which, as you know, comes the remainder of all creation, that of the universe included. Can you imagine it? A sole writer writes a sole story for a sole reader and, the two, reader and writer, are the very same person. To what is creation reduced? Do you feel as much panic now as I? Keep on imagining and, like me, you'll certainly reach the height of dread: God—the Word—creates a world for men—Butler perhaps assures us it is for women—but God and men are but one being and at one time. Where will we find the Beginning, when it was only the Word, and where the End if men appear and, Man and the Word are simultaneous and the same? Do you have an answer to my question? (I've put forth several questions but I'm sure you've realized that my question, at once, is single and multiple). Do you have one? I do have an answer, which I fear is the only one. Nothingness is my answer.

The reader of Homer corroborates that the book received in the mail narrates the story of Ulysses: a man takes part in the conquest of Troy—he is born—and, in the company of his companions, decides to return to his home—he lives—. The avatars along the road would have him believe that life is a return and that at his arrival—he knows he'll arrive, we all arrive—a woman awaits him who, during the wait, has played at winding and unwinding a skein of wool—death—. Now at home, Ulysses, crying, embraces his wife. Homer, in the book the reader of Homer is reading, writes of Ulysses' tears: "It is now I who acts as the body of time./ Mine are the veins through which course memories/ All those canals that now flow into me,/ in this pool, this lake without memory's form./ Those beings at whose side I lived,/ those who I saw and to whom I spoke./ They live in me, I am all of them, they me./ I possess their breath, like them,/ in any place in the world they may be,/ as they possess mine./ The breath of who we were./ It is I who sees them and speaks to them,/ he who hears those bodiless images speak,/ that nothingness that so many do not see and in which they do not believe./ It is they, they run through me, they show themselves and flee, leaving behind a misty wake./ Behold them."

The reader of Homer doesn't share the gap created in literature by the so-called literary genres. Next to the lamp that illuminates his sleepless nights, he fancies that he has often found a verse hidden in prose—or at least subjected by the limits imposed by the page—which assumes a length within the canon dictated by prose. He has imagined a single infinite line, or almost so, drawn by all written words, a horizon of words which, like the horizon of the natural world, curves and enfolds the world itself, lending it a form we devise, a form insinuated by words. On one such night, he turned off the lamp, allowing only the light of words to illuminate the world; there, more resplendent than ever, stood the trees; there, lit by millions of words, the sea was a basalt lamina beneath which he could hear the din of the tides, which were no longer the pulse of sea but a torrent of words, the jump of a flying fish vying with sea birds over the ownership of the sky. There the world was lifeless, no matter how much the night, on that occasion, may have been the brilliant outburst of words.

On another night he closed all the books in the house and turned on all the lights of the world. Nothing was then familiar to him, not even his desk, on top of which lay several blank sheets of paper waiting for ink to give them life, names, words. That world of light began to succumb to the darkness of an absolutely empty space, wordless, impossible to name or be named, existent, therefore, in nothingness. Behold the world, he said to himself that night, but I don't know what world it may be. Nor do I know if that is the world, given that I cannot name anything or anybody. Before me there is something with which I am unfamiliar and which I cannot possibly know, ergo, nothingness is not an absolute vacuum

but the impossibility to know it. And, replete with light, with objects, with persons, nothingness sketched another horizon, a horizon that followed the edge and the beginning of nothingness. The horizon of nothingness was also nothingness. He turned off the lights of the world and opened a book, the book he had found in the mail. He read: "...faces pass by me,/ the shadows of those who are now only shadows, names./ I can feel them walk in and out of me,/ cross through me as if I were an open field,/ a house without walls./ A vacuum through which they,/ with their lips that are no longer lips,/ with their faces that are now almost only imagination and smoke,/ they come and go slowly, silently..." The reader of Homer read the words written by Homer—I refer to this Homer, the present one, in this book—and the world, as the reading progressed, was again a journey to Ithaca, a return. The reader of Homer then realized that the true journey of Ulysses never did have an arrival nor an outset; the wanderer we call Ulysses, in reality, was a journey, the only journey. Ulysses left Troy for Ithaca, according to the story that most people attribute to Homer, but Homer told us another story: Ulysses left Ulysses on his way to Ulysses—on his travels he would learn that beginning and end are one and the same—because the arrival is always the point of departure.

Jorge Luis Borges, another blind poet—a descendant of Isidoro Suárez, who led the cavalry charge on the plane of Junín—understands the story of Sinbad, the sailor in the nights of the Caliph of Baghdad, as the Arabic version of *The Odyssey*. The adventures of Sinbad, nonetheless, are only just that, an adventure. Ulysses—this other blind man claims *The Odyssey* as his own and names it *Universal History of Infamy*—also sails but, and believe me, Antonio, his sea is made of time and his adventure is really this one: to find out if the skein of wool with which Penelope weaves and unweaves in order to weave and unweave her long wait is still intact and exactly like Ulysses himself saw it before the conquest of Troy. It is in this way that Homer stopped time in his story and, given that nothing happens because everything takes place at the same time, we can just as well conclude that life and death are one and the same, without anything happening in between except for everything and nothing. You yourself have written: "Transparent, they told us,/ as one can say to clay,/ we must be transparent./ This matter, this dark and dense slime/ which we are and come not to know,/ this matter that is only sustained,/ that only lives in the shadows,/ ever pursuing light from afar,/ without knowing how to, pursuing light/ just as one pursues a murderer,/ with dogs, running through swamps." Transparent, that is: nothing before or after us, those of us who, being transparent, are not here because nobody can see us.

As he reads the book he found in the mail, the reader of Homer—that is, you, Antonio, and me, and Homer himself—mentally goes over the story that others and he himself call *The Story*. Based on the small stories that constitute the confused and highly eloquent vastness of *The Story*, he infers that Homer is not so much a proper name as a much abused concept. *The Story* and its protagonist both seem Homeric to him, a subject hotly debated among different doctrines, all set on discovering the same. One should probably also attribute to the vast abyss of the Homeric, the authorship of this letter which I, my friend, write to you because you sent me one of your very own books: Homer writes for Homer about a book by Homer. This excess wears me out and excites me as much or more than the medium chosen to perpetuate it. The medium, Antonio, the words that you and I use—you in your book, me in my letter—they are not here so we can use them at our whim; rather, they are only here in writing, in all things that are written, and that here is a monster which is born, dies, is reborn without anyone being able to control its life cycles. Words—the mothers of literature—are the daughters of Homer and are, besides, the medium—yours, mine, that of so many others—for rewriting what has already been written. I am afraid literature may be Homeric, I am afraid, and I say it again, that we rewrite the same

words on the pages of a book already written: “Fear not pain,/ all is the product of equilibrium/ and not even the smallest leaf/ of a tree falls from the branch/ without echoing/ to the other end of the universe.” Are we the small leaves whose fall echoes through the universe, or is it the universe that echoes, causing our fall? Answer me, my friend. This is the anguish that threatens my life.

The reader of Homer has read the book you sent him. He builds his verses on what was your prose and knows that you and others will read them. This letter may actually be an extensive and surely confused meditation on a type of writing we consider literary, that is, sublime; a meditation, as I was saying, meant to be shared among, though perhaps not accepted by, most of those who read it. Some may think that it is literature in decline, others may find it arrogant; all of us, according to many, are children of God, but such a relationship is not an act of divine pride; all others may understand it as pretentious expropriation. I would agree with the latter because this, precisely, has been my intention: to take from Homer what belongs to him, to make it mine and that of so many others; to take from you what belongs to you, to make it Homer’s and everybody’s, including yours, Antonio; to take from me —this letter— in order to make it yours, and Homer’s, and everybody’s, given that you and I and everybody else are Homer, as he himself is because we all make up part of that being and his words, which are as much yours and his as they are mine and ours.

The reader of Homer will likely read other books which, like this one, will be the same one, and another rain —and it may well be that which today, yesterday, and tomorrow soaks the ground— will probably wet his face when, at dawn, he opens the windows so that the light of darkness illuminate what now has a name. That day will go by amid the hustle and bustle of those who buy and sell, and buy again in order to sell and, at night, with all lamps shining, he will receive further news of Ithaca: new letters left in the mailbox, newspapers, books in which Homer talks about trips to the Moon or about the dream that Marco Polo —that is, the Ulysses that Homer tried to be for an Ithaca with airs of Venice— had carried out upon writing not *The Book of Wonders* but the marvel of a book already written and read, like this letter that Homer —that is, I— write for Homer —that is, you— because both of us —that is, he— know, once and for all, that all words are one, the same, this one: Ithaca.

Destiny, Antonio, is not a place but a manner of searching for it. In view of the fact that Heraclitus proclaimed the infinite tedium of succeeding and identical hours and days, what or who could possibly prevent me from suspending the plural —not hours and days: the hour, the day— from eradicating continuity to the point of halting everything in one instant: all instants are the same. All the same? Why not a sole instant, the only one, in which everything happens at once? I do not deny movement, but the succession of movement. I am not denying your book in this letter, Antonio, but I do affirm that both book and letter were written at the same time and by the same person: their receiver, the receiver: “All things are mirrors,/ [...] this we don’t want to accept,/ we rush, we go from one place to another, we dream,/ but there we are inside, dreaming/ that we are outside,/ that we have free will/ and it is we/ who gaze into mirrors/ and we make/ those lifeless figures move/ in one direction and another,/ not backwards,/ that we are an illusion,/ the reflection of the unknown.”

A compatriot of the blind Argentine —the relative of the Junín cavalryman Suárez— has also attempted to interpret Heraclitus by way of halting the succession of movement. He writes: “I live with a dark animal. What I do by day, it eats by night. What I do by night, it

eats by day. The only thing it does not eat is my memory. It fattens on my smallest faults and fears. I don't let it sleep. I am its dark animal."

Oneness —overwhelming and worrisome, so diverse and, in movement, so replete with stillness— this oneness in which we are all one and one is all that we do, should lead me to finish all that I've imagined up until now: the reader of Homer likely will not write again, it is possible that he won't even post a letter to thank his friend for sending a book. He admits that everything has already been written and that everything is yet to be written; he hopes that something, at last, will begin and that something, at last, will conclude, despite the fact that he is not unaware of the impossibility of his wish.

Our reader —he is evidently ours— opens the book that came in the mail, sees that it is prose, reads the word *novels*, recognizes his name in the dedication: "For/ [...] your melancholy and the/ weapons with which to vanquish it,/ springtime and this/ downpour of words./ With the friendship/ of/ Homer." He smiles. He knows that all days are the same and that the apparent surprise couldn't be more obvious or common: twenty four hours of sixty minutes of sixty seconds, and thus one day after another. Today the same as yesterday, yesterday the same as tomorrow. When —he wonders— did Homer write that dedication for him? Yesterday, tomorrow, today? When could he have read, will read, is reading that dedication? Our reader is convinced that writers, the sum total of writers, are one, and that that one is Antonio, he is Homer and many more. But I, my friend, I'm not sure that I'll get this letter written because I don't know whether you and I, and many others, are part of something or of someone who at this very moment writes *The Odyssey*. Someone or something fearsome; so much so that his or its destiny depends on us, just as we depend on his or its destiny. We, Antonio, we ourselves are Ithaca, a return, a journey back to the place we never left.

I have imagined, or believe to have imagined, the following: a reader waits for a book in order to write a letter, but someone or something waits for the letter in order to write that book. Tell me if this is what literature is. Tell me another thing: is it something sent or is it a return? I tell you that it isn't magic nor nostalgia, but time and paradox, spiritualism and melancholy, nothingness as the only reply.

A fond embrace, my dear friend,

P.S. The verses transcribed in this letter are not, properly speaking, verses, this even though there's nothing nor anybody who could prohibit the same; they are prose passages from Antonio Soler's novel, *The Melancholy Spiritualist*. Nonetheless, what could keep us from imagining that Soler conceived his words as poetry and that someone, I don't know who, determined that prose would be his work's destiny? In effect, all of us, or nearly all of us, have seen and read prose editions of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, while tradition assures us that Homer was a poet and that his texts are two extensive poems. Perhaps they are only one even more extensive poem that has come down to us in its present duality because someone, of whose identity I know nothing, willed it to be so, surely against the wishes of Homer himself.

Similarly, I transcribe in this letter a prose piece, so to speak, in which the author speaks of a "dark animal." Juan Gelman is the author of these words, which are not in prose but in verse form, verses cited from Gelman's poem, "The Animal."

10. I live on an avenue called “Cánovas del Castillo.” At the head of the avenue, one may find a statue of the illustrious politician, a bronze by Martínez Labrador. The avenue leads to the sea and ends where the waves break on the sand, suggesting, in this way, the idea of a world suddenly on the brink of the precipice.

But for lanky palm trees, my avenue has no real trees, nor anything really outstanding about it, except for the aforementioned bronze effigy and for the way it faces its destiny where the waters of the sea run.

11. Of note in Bioy Casares and in Jorge Luis Borges as well, are a number of Judaic elements, elements that serve to enrich and lend a mystery to the works of these writers. Such elements are consonant with Buenos Aires, the city in which both writers lived. Buenos Aires was, and continues to be, a place with a thriving Jewish community. Its members, who have come to Argentina for a variety of reasons, live at a considerable distance from Jerusalem, a city which, for so many, is a dream difficult to attain.

In Spain, the *cristianos viejos* —the Spaniards from age-old Christian families— for a long time employed the word *marrano* —the Jew recently converted to Christianity—. This word became a synonym for evil and excommunication, or was used as a derogative term referring to those who, under the repressive circumstances of the times, made a false conversion and continued, albeit secretly, to be practice Judaism.

I wonder, when I manage to conceive the *marrano* as the analogy of what could have been, how many people, no matter what their creeds, still believe that the *marrano* essence is a trespass totally foreign to their personality and place in the world. The answer to this question makes me more of a shipwreck victim than an ignoramus. The answer to this question is the shadow of an answer.

12. In the book that lends its title to this sonnet, María Zambrano appears to seek an unsettling Aristotelian balance between two worlds, or two forms of the world. Said forms are apparently irreconcilable because they are preconceived according to two different myths: the first is based on reason and logic; the second definitely hinges on Homer and Pythagoras.

Given that the only truths we know with certainty are theorems —anterior to us and the world itself; true today, yesterday, and tomorrow— we could conjecture that Zambrano’s efforts are more useless than they are hopeful for any kind of reconciliation. Why did logic, which led Plato to his rather insignificant *Republic*, have to prevail over myth?

The world proposed by Homer and Hesiod closes in on itself by way of sagas and legends, whereas the world of Pythagoras aspires to self-containment by ratifying provable truths thanks to an apparently irrefutable empiricism.

13. The three fragments grouped under this title were conceived of and written on different dates and precede the balance of the poems in this book. I took the occasion to gather them here and, although they have been rewritten for the occasion, they maintain their original intention.

As far as I can tell, all societies up to now consider blood relations to be the strongest unifying ties among human beings and assume, towards strengthening said ties, certain risks unthinkable in any other type of human relationship.

I know as a fact that when blood relationship is not accompanied by certain behaviors, it can be more a burden than a help, more something to forget than a unifying force.

The fact that there are points of contact in the biological history of several individuals need not foster, I believe, anything that transcends such a circumstance, especially when, in addition to the happenstance imposed by blood, there does not exist friendship, a circumstance created by choice.

Such has been my own case. I have no friends among my blood relatives, nor do I strive to develop any friendship that has been imposed by force by what I consider a mere accident. This distanced stance does not make me uncomfortable. It liberates me.

14. I am not sure that death is the end of life, but I am convinced, no matter how paradoxical this may seem, that life is part of something immense that we call death.
15. I take the title of this sonnet from a story by Macedonio Fernández. They say he was the teacher of Borges. Or was it Borges himself who said it?
16. “The Lady with the Ermine” is a well-known painting of Leonardo Da Vinci. I believe that I see in this piece the macabre joke of cynic vis-à-vis certain *Madonnas* painted by some of his contemporaries. Perhaps the mortal beauty, the young lady painted by Leonardo, holds in her arms a small and unsettling devil—the ermine—.
17. Reading is a city in the state of Pennsylvania. Close by is Kutztown University and, next to this, a beautiful lake that I visited during the thaw.

Heavens of September

Most of the poems in this book give way to different prose texts, "Notes", which sometimes complement them or, on occasions, give rise to a new text with which the author intentionally asks the reader where and how prose and verse begin and end. In *El cielo de septiembre*, once again, Juvenal Soto questions the conceptual veracity of literary genres from the most scrupulous formal respect for them. In addition, the poem "El bosque de Homero" together with the note "Lector de Homero" add a reasoned uncertainty about Literature as a vehicle of communication between the writer and the reader, since both could be one and the same. Originally written in Spanish, it was published in 2007 under the title *El cielo de septiembre* in 2007 (Almuzara publishing house). Daniel M. Murphy translated it into English in 2010.

Daniel M. Murphy

A Professor of Spanish at Hollins University, he enjoyed a distinguished career as an educator, Hispanist, literary critic and translator. A graduate of Colorado State University, Dan received his M.A. and Ph.D. in Spanish from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He joined the Hollins faculty in 1993 and was passionate about sharing the culture, civilization and literature of the Spanish-speaking world with his students. He took particular pride in the Hollins alumnae who pursued graduate studies in the discipline, some of whom went on to teach Spanish at the elementary, high school or college level. An outstanding Hispanist and scholar of Spanish literature, he devoted much of his critical work to the analysis and translation of the poetry of Vicente Aleixandre, publishing in 2001 the result of his work in a volume that is today one of the best references in the English language on this Nobel Prize-winning Spanish poet, *Vicente Aleixandre's Stream of Poetic Consciousness* (Bucknell, 2001). *Heavens of September*, translated in close collaboration with the author of the book, is probably the last translation made by Professor Murphy, who died in 2012.

Juvenal Soto

Biography

Malaga, 1954, studied Law and Philosophy at the University of Granada. Writer, photographer and editor, he has taught Spanish literature courses at the universities of Malaga (Spain), Milan (Italy), Dickinson College (Pennsylvania, USA), Lebanon Valley College (Pennsylvania, USA) and Hollins University (Virginia, USA). He has also been an opinion columnist in the newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo*, and in the weekly *Cambio 16*. For ten years he directed the literary supplement of the newspaper *Sur*, *Sur Cultural*. Between 1988 and 1991 he presented and coordinated the program *Entre líneas*, on the First Channel of TVE, dedicated to the analysis and dissemination of contemporary literature. In 1988 he created for the City Council of Malaga the program "Escribir en Europa" (Writing in Europe), which he directed until 1992. This program included the cycle of conferences "Writing in Europe", the magazine of literary creation "Ciudad del Paraíso" and the Poetry Collection of the same name, in which he edited the first two issues, dedicated to the poetry of José Antonio Muñoz Rojas and Rafael Pérez Estrada. He created and directed for three years the

Aula Rafael Pérez Estrada, dedicated to the analysis of contemporary literature and thought. In 2004 he founded the "Las 4 Estaciones Collection", which he has directed until 2020. He has exhibited his photographic works in Spain, Argentina and the U.S.A. He currently directs the "Málaga capital Coín" poetry sheets, published and sponsored by the García Agüera Foundation.

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